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# 1,000 Prairie View students march for voting rights

## Thousands march in Prairie View for voting rights

HELEN ERIKSEN, Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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Chantea Cooper, seated, reads campaign literature as she and other Prairie View A&M University students wait to vote after a 2½-hour march to the Waller County Courthouse in Hempstead on Tuesday.

**PRAIRIE VIEW** — More than 1,000 Prairie View A&M University students and supporters marched seven miles to the polls on Tuesday to protest the lack of an early voting place on campus for the March 4 election.

Students, local leaders, civil rights activists and elected officials walked from the campus to the **Waller County Courthouse** in Hempstead carrying "Register to Vote" signs. The majority wore black shirts with the slogan, "It is 2008. We will vote!"

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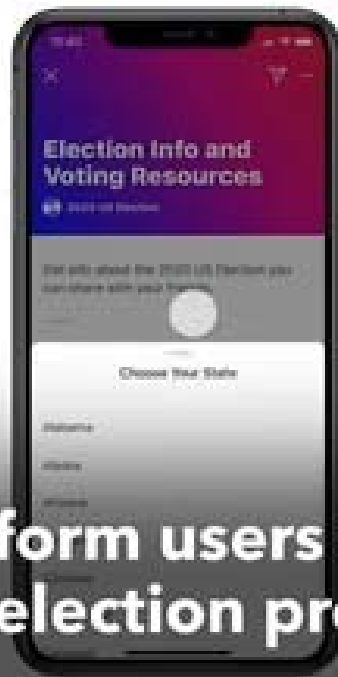
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Following After the march, some students stood in a long line to cast their ballots on the first day of early voting, while others filled out new voter registration cards in a building across from the courthouse. Early voting ended at about 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, and some waited for five hours to vote.

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Video: Facebook



**to inform users about  
the election process**

Freshman **Brittney Veasey**, who was voting for the first time, said she took the 21 x

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"I feel like we're making history today," she said. "Instead of making it inconvenient, students should be encouraged to vote."

Last week, under pressure from federal authorities, Waller County officials added three temporary polling places for early voting, ditching plans to open only one voting site in advance of the March 4 primary.

The **Justice Department** questioned the county's original decision to cut early-voting sites from a half dozen throughout the county to one in Hempstead. Officials said the county could not afford equipment or staff to operate the additional sites.

Following an emergency meeting last week, the county submitted a revamped proposal to the Justice Department that included one more day of early voting on Thursday at

Meanwhile, the county is being investigated by the Texas Attorney General's Office **X**

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the three new polling sites. Federal officials have 60 days to review and approve the plan, but have not issued any objections.

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Saturday.

Mergel defended the county's decision to have the polling place at a nearby community center rather than on campus.

"It is in a county-owned building that we have always used," she said.

Some students had not learned about the added voting site near the campus, but Mergel said the county advertised it in the local media.

On Election Day, students can vote on campus in the **University Alumni Association**.

**Christina Sanders**, who helped organize the march and is a member of Black Youth Vote! Texas, said the county made concessions only after the Justice Department intervened and students complained.

She said the march was necessary to send a message to local officials that a lack of a voting place on campus "is unacceptable."

The school has about 8,000 students, and officials estimate there are 3,000 registered voters among them.

State Rep. **Sylvester Turner**, D-Houston, called it a "gross injustice" that the county did not seek input from the minority community prior to before establishing polling sites. He said the county has a turbulent history of thwarting Prairie View students' attempts to vote.

The controversy over voting came to a head in 2004 when students marched from the campus to the courthouse after former Waller County District Attorney **Oliver Kitzman** declared them ineligible to vote, claiming they did not meet state residency standards.